



“We don’t think enough about staircases. Nothing is more beautiful in old houses than the staircases. Nothing is uglier, colder, more hostile, meaner in today’s apartment buildings. We should learn to live more on staircases. But how?”

—Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*

Stairs and Steps: Walking above the Earth

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Most forms of movement on foot occur across horizontal surfaces. We stroll, amble, promenade, or saunter on beaches, along sidewalks, down city streets, in parks, and through forests. Stairs are noteworthy in that they depart from this terrestrial axis and plane of relative stability. They move upwards or downwards rather than along the earth’s proliferating contours. In so doing, they offer walkers accompanying rewards, challenges, and risks.

In leaving the sure-footed realm of the familiar, stairs engage both our bodies and minds. They contest our presumed and usually reliable sense of physical balance, threatening to send us tumbling suddenly to the bottom of a stairwell. They disrupt our walking rhythm and pace but also teach us about stamina, leg

strength, and willpower. They generate anticipation of—or longing for—arrival and rest. We might await a panoramic view at the top of a long set of steps or appreciate the chance to relax on a bench after a protracted journey upwards. I experienced this elation recently after walking up the steps on Corcovado Mountain in Rio de Janeiro to reach the Art Deco statue [Cristo Redentor](#) and to survey the beautiful city and its curvilinear beaches.

Like mountain climbing, walking up a “flight” of stairs can become about psychological ascension or spiritual aspiration, even transcendence. Walking up as waking up. At times, it may encourage a minor kind of personal heroism defined by grit and persistence—akin to social climbing—perhaps through an imagined enterprise of

overcoming weightedness, of temporarily slaying gravity's pull.

Ambulation assumes many forms, from dog walks to mall walks, from aesthetic flânerie and circuit walks in a garden or museum to meditative [kinhin](#) and pilgrimages. Stairs also come in many guises and styles. Sometimes a staircase seems almost to be suspended magically in the air. Beautiful staircases often suggest theatricality, even grandeur in their audacity to defy boundedness to the earth. They might even become an evolving stage or a form of interactive sculpture. Spiral staircases may resemble the double helix of DNA strands. Erecting an impressive set of stairs depends upon tethering together geometry, design skills, and artistry.

Stairs become places, too, including spots to rest, sites to stack books, or settings for a group photo. The steps outside an apartment building are gathering grounds for conversations, opportunities to smoke a cigarette, sip a beverage, or enjoy a slice of watermelon—respite from work to watch the world walk leisurely by. In this regard, steps and stairs serve as affordances for pedestrians and other wayfarers, stationary objects that satisfy a variety of changing human needs as well as an invitation to nonhuman beings (dogs, birds, squirrels) to put them equally to use. Stairs that lead up to or down from a domicile also create a conduit and

bridge between the anonymity of the street and the intimacy of the home.

Although this point is frequently overlooked, a great amount of walking occurs within buildings or community infrastructure, including bridges, tunnels, parking lots, airports, and stadiums. In such instances, we are often quite literally inside of artifacts and technology. In these and other spaces, we pass people on the stairs as we do when we saunter on the sidewalk. When I lived in Astoria, Queens, I had to regularly pass a married couple who lived directly below my apartment and with whom I once had a serious disagreement. During the altercation, one of them threw a punch at my head from behind a barely open door. Walking past the pair and their two dogs on the stairs subsequently grew to be an extremely uncomfortable process, a tense tango of sidestepping another confrontation.

Walking the stairs has entered our cultural language. The expression, *l'esprit de l'escalier*—literally “spirit of the staircase” or “staircase wit”—describes a situation in which one thinks of an insightful or witty remark that one could have shared at a party or an event, though only after departing the social occasion—while descending the steps, for example. French philosopher Denis Diderot coined the apt phrase in *Paradoxe sur le Comédien*. Characterizing an incident when he was insulted, Diderot

observed: “A sensitive man, such as myself, overwhelmed by the argument leveled against him, becomes confused and doesn't come to himself again until at the bottom of the stairs.”

Literature and social history contain many other interesting references to staircases. One often approaches religious shrines through a pilgrimage and long series of stairs. [Mount Girnar](#), a sacred site for Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain devotees in the Indian state of Gujarat, for example, is accessed on foot by walking up nearly 10,000 steps in rugged terrain. Cinderella loses her glass slipper hurrying down the staircase. Julius Caesar was assassinated on steps. Films such as *Rocky*, *The Exorcist*, and *The Joker* feature memorable stair scenes. And, of course, Led Zeppelin's “Stairway to Heaven” is played widely around the world. In such cases, we come to see both the precarity and danger of stairs as well as their beauty and allure.

A rich vocabulary of terms can apply to well-crafted and ornate staircases. With handrails, there are finials, volutes, goosenecks, newels, balusters, rosettes, and turnouts. Elsewhere on the steps, we might find spandrels, landings, platforms, aprons, and balconies. The names for helical or “spiral” stairs alone are legion: circular, winding, elliptical, oval, turret, turnpike, corkscrew, belfry, and cochlea among them.

Stairs have become more direct objects of aesthetic enjoyment and recreation as well. There are cascading steps with serpentine turns like the meandering bends in a river. Stairs can nearly metamorphose visually into mazes or labyrinths. In some cities, they have been creatively transformed into a black and white piano keyboard that can be sounded by one's descending or ascending feet prior to entering a subway station or trolley terminal. Children in particular love to play upon them, drumming out sounds the way they might strike a xylophone and improvising melodies as they walk up and down.

M. C. Escher's lithographs play with images of stairs, too, offering a logic-bending perspective on bodily movement that undermines our entrenched perceptions. “[Ascending and Descending](#)” depicts a never-ending staircase upon which walk two rows of identically dressed men. “[Relativity](#)” shows seven sets of stairs where the normal rules of gravity fail to function, and “[House of Stairs](#)” is populated with imaginary creatures who move up and down a tall structure filled with interwoven staircases.

Marcel Duchamp's cubist and futuristic painting “[Nude Descending a Staircase](#)” presents a figure composed of cylindrical and conical shapes walking rhythmically down a set of stairs, revealing a hybridized organic and mechanical body in motion through

a succession of superimposed images. Generating a scandal for the art world in 1912—“an explosion in a shingle factory,” as one critic put it—the picture invites comparison with Eadweard Muybridge’s chronophotography, especially “[Woman Walking Downstairs](#)” (1887). X. J. Kennedy’s ekphrastic poem of the same name as Duchamp’s painting comments delightfully upon this image. It describes a “One-woman waterfall” who descends the stairs in “snowing flesh,” stopping momentarily on the final step to gather “her motions into shape.”

Staircases, of course, have existed for many centuries and the earliest ones were solely functional in orientation. Steps cut from tree trunks helped travelers navigate uneven terrain. The Egyptians and Mayans built stairs to ascend pyramids, and in the Middle Ages they were used for military purposes, with spiral staircases constructed in castles. While prototypes have been found dating back to 6,000 BCE, the Roman architect Vitruvius devised the initial set of influential rules for their design.

The etymology of the word “stair” connects us in European languages to “path” (German), “walk” (Welsh), and “scaffold” (Dutch). As the pre-Socratic thinker Heraclitus points out, “The way up and the way down are one and the same,” and when we apply this ancient insight to the staircase, we can grasp the circularity at work in

walking rising and falling steps. The philosopher Gaston Bachelard also perceived a related form of repetition when he noted how the first stairway we encounter in youth typically inscribes within us—through our bodily habits over time—a deep and recurring sense of the home, which is divided spatially and psychically by the vertical poles of cellar (darkness and anxiety) and attic (light and reason).

My own Victorian home in Philadelphia has multiple sets of stairs that rise respectively from the basement to the fourth floor, from the sidewalk to the front porch, and from the garden to the back deck. Each flight has a distinct texture and feel, and it seems to voice sounds that speak to the deeper history of the inhabited structure. As I walk through the house, the wooden steps beneath me tend to sink ever-so-slightly and often to creak or groan plaintively, as does my body increasingly as it ages.

When I stroll the streets of other cities, I keep an eye and ear out for interesting or unusual staircases. I once stayed in an Amsterdam apartment that possessed stairs that rose almost straight up from the door at street level. Ascending them was like mounting and climbing a tall ladder to reach the top floor. Older houses in the city were apparently constructed very narrowly and quite high to avoid taxes that were levied according to architectural width rather than height.

For the elderly and people with physical vulnerabilities, stairs can present impediments to safe walking. “All things can be deadly to us, even the things made to serve us . . . and stairs can kill us, if we do not walk circumspectly,” notes Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*. Laurel and Hardy’s iconic film *The Music Box* makes this point in a slightly different way, as it depicts the two men trying to move a piano up a lengthy set of stairs, only to witness it rolling dangerously back down numerous times.

A *New Yorker* cartoon provides a contemporary humorous twist to this kind of situation in showing several people in gym clothes entering an elevator upon which hangs a sign that reads TO THE STAIRMASTER. In this regard, exercise and the potential romance of walking the stairs are both lost to us when technological alternatives such as escalators, moving walkways, ramps, and lifts are selected or foisted upon us.

In a world where walking is progressively displaced by automobiles and other mechanical or motorized choices, we should arguably appreciate the opportunities to keep our feet securely to the ground, even when we have the chance to discover forms of flight on the stairs. In this way, we might gain a valuable view from above about the necessity—as Nietzsche beseeches us—of remaining “faithful to the earth.” ✱

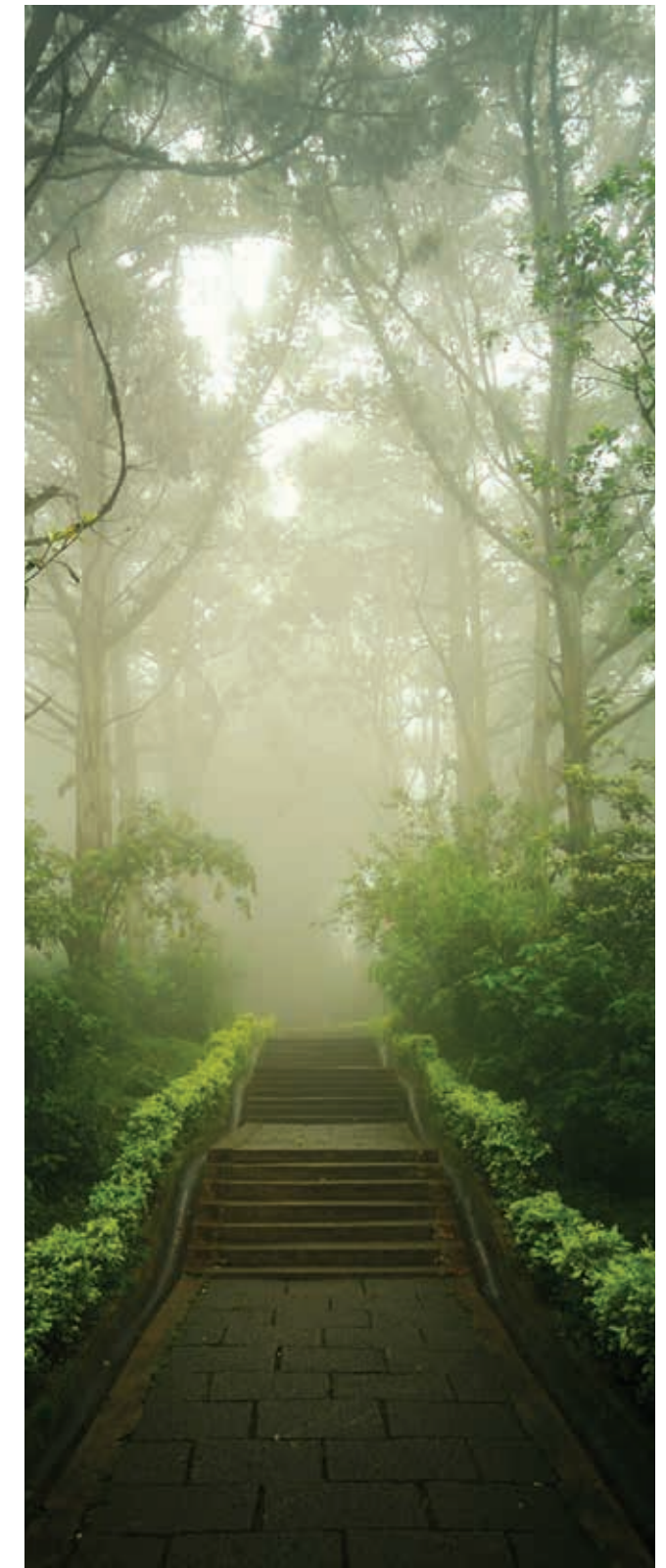


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